

## Religion, Citizenship and Participation

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# Religion, Citizenship and Participation

## A Case Study of Immigrant Muslim Women in Norwegian Mosques

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the increasing participation of Muslim women in mosques in Norway in light of current discourses on citizenship, gender and migration. It discusses how various processes in the mosques can be interpreted as contradictory and complex by sometimes increasing the participation of women and promoting liberation, while at other times constraining women's activities through various forms of discipline and control. Women are vital for the building of religious institutions among Muslim immigrant communities, and they are slowly achieving more space in such institutions. They are also being included in new forms of participation in some mosques. Recently, some Muslim women in Norway have made public calls for the reinterpretation of the Qur'an in ways that are more inclusive towards women. Despite pressures from both within and outside the mosques, however, Muslim congregations in Norway can still be described as patriarchal gender regimes where the participation and citizenship of women depends on the willingness of men to include them.

**KEY WORDS** citizenship ♦ gender regime ♦ mosque ♦ Muslim women ♦ religion

### RELIGION, CITIZENSHIP AND GENDER REGIMES

A current trend in feminist studies of 'citizenship' is the opening up of the term from a narrow political-legal definition to a broader and more inclusive cultural-social definition, and, subsequently, attempts to analyse the extent to which women in various communities exercise citizenship in this broader sense (Lister, 2003; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, 2006). The classic

view of citizenship as delineating legal and political rights and duties has been challenged on several fronts, including its limitation of citizenship to the public sphere and its narrow view of citizenship as 'status'. Feminist scholarship has thus claimed that citizenship encompasses *practices* within all spheres of life – be they political, economic, social, cultural, religious, domestic or intimate. An emphasis on practice implies that citizenship is not a fixed attribute of a particular group of individuals included in a given polity, but that citizenship is contested, fluid and dynamic, and involves processes of negotiation and struggle (Lister, 2003; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, 2006). A feminist perspective on citizenship would also argue that classic citizen rights such as holding a passport and voting in political elections are not gender neutral but may be distributed and applied in ways that are discriminatory of women in general and of ethnic minority, immigrant and refugee women in particular (Lister, 2003; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, 2006; see also Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999).

From this type of feminist argument it follows that if women do not have the same rights and opportunities as men to participate in all areas of life, that is, if women are not free to choose whether they want to act as full citizens at work, in the family, in civil society and in politics, then they are not treated as equal citizens and are hence discriminated against. In so far as rights and the freedom to choose do not guarantee equal outcomes for women and men, a radical implication of feminist theories of citizenship is that *practices* should be inclusive of women and men in all aspects of life.

Religious practice poses a particular dilemma for a broadened notion of citizenship, as patriarchal religious laws, norms and practices are often at variance with state-implemented laws on gender equality and international conventions on human rights such as CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women). For example, in the context of Islam and human rights, traditional Shari'a law legitimates and even 'requires legal discrimination of women' (Mayer, 1991: 99), and in effect undermines the protection women in Muslim states have under international conventions such as CEDAW (Mayer, 1991: 137; see also Moghadam, 2002). In the Norwegian context, the state law on gender equality prohibits discrimination against women, but religious associations are exempt from gender-equality legislation and can legally discriminate 'on the basis of gender or sexual orientation when such discrimination is based on religious doctrine' (Skjeie, 2004: 6; see also Skjeie, 2006). We might say that for religious associations, including the Norwegian state church, the issue of gender equality is deemed a private matter by the state, as religious associations are exempt from laws dictating gender equality in leadership and participation. On the other hand, by virtue of their status as 'voluntary associations of civil society' (Lister, 2003: 30), religious associations are part of the public sphere and should

thus be subject to feminist investigations of citizenship. In a sense, religious institutions, in overlapping the private and public spheres, can be seen as 'borderlands' where the contestation and negotiation of citizenship may become especially acute.<sup>1</sup> It can be argued that the religious arena, in its different formations across a variety of religious belief and practice, presents a test case for the inclusion or exclusion of women in the broad definition and practice of citizenship that is currently being promoted by feminist scholarship.

This article provides an attempt to examine 'religious citizenship' in a particular context, that of the mosque, and the changing role of women within it. It is based on the notion that religious belief and practice has both private and public aspects, and that the institutional practice of religious belief should be governed by gender-equality laws. Generally, the 'successful integration and participation of Muslim citizens and residents into European societies' (Triandafyllidou et al., 2006: 1) may be crucial for an inclusive multicultural citizenship, but the integration and participation of women into Muslim communities and organizations may be equally important for an inclusive gendered citizenship.

This article analyses how various processes in mosques can be interpreted as contradictory and complex as they sometimes increase the participation of women and promote women's liberation, while they at other times cement or maintain the disciplining and control of women. In mosques and other public arenas both formal and informal negotiations take place about the group rights and duties of women and men. These group rights and duties are decisive in terms of the opportunities and constraints they produce for individual women and men who wish to be active citizens in an arena such as the mosque. While Borchgrevink (2002) and Skjeie (2004) have discussed contradictions between freedom of religion and gender equality from a more theoretical perspective, this article contributes empirical evidence from a particular minority context, that of the mosque.

My focus is primarily on Muslims that have immigrated to Norway, and on how religious faith and practice in diaspora can create new opportunities and constraints for women. In Norway, Islam is first and foremost a religion adhered to by immigrants and their offspring. While there are currently between 120,000 and 150,000 Muslims in the country, it is estimated that only about 1000 ethnic Norwegians have converted to Islam (Leirvik, 2007). Religious adherence and identity are important factors in processes of migration (Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz, 2000; Warner and Wittner, 1998), and for many Muslim immigrants in Norway religion is the most important aspect of their identity (Ahlberg, 1990). Migration processes can also deeply influence relations between women and men and may impact on their status, positions and roles within society and family by putting pressure on established norms and practices (Brown, 2006; Husain and O'Brien, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kibria, 1990;

Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, 2006). Through migration women can become marginalized in some areas, while they may be empowered and enabled to act in others. Some immigrant women in Norway seem, for example, to have lost influence on family life through a lack of language skills (Wikan, 1995), while at the same time they have gained legal rights that can enhance their position within the same social unit.

Women have a tradition of mobilizing energy and resources through religious organization (Warner, 1993; Wuthnow and Lehrman, 1990), and the religious arena is one of the spaces where the formation of and negotiations about gender relations are taking place (Brasher, 1998; Stacey, 1998). Religious beliefs, practices and organizations are themselves 'gendered' to the extent that women and men are allocated different rights and duties and perform different religious roles. A study of women's changing roles within the mosque may thus indicate how migration puts pressure on established institutional norms and practices and how gendered religious identities may be contested and changed over time in the context of diaspora.

The concept of diaspora suggests 'a situation where groups live in minority situations outside and often far away from their country of origin' (Jacobsen, 2001: 16). This situation is not fixed, however, and diasporic identities 'may wax and wane' over time (Clifford, 1997: 249), depending on the opportunities and constraints offered by the larger society. Importantly, 'diasporic experiences are always gendered' (Clifford, 1997: 258), but whether or not they reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures is an empirical question that needs to be investigated in particular contexts.

Werbner (2002: 125) suggests that Pakistani communities in Britain are diasporic in as much as they are oriented 'towards a different past or pasts and towards another place or places'. First-generation immigrants are probably most likely to identify with a 'national diaspora', referring to a particular nation of origin, while for offspring generations the image of a shared past and place may be weakened by ties to the society in which they are raised. Pakistani communities in Britain and elsewhere in the West also belong to the Muslim diaspora, characterized by 'a collective past and common destiny' (Werbner, 2002: 121), with reference to Islamic history and a global community of believers. In the Norwegian context, I would suggest that the experience of immigrant Muslims and their offspring is similarly characterized by tensions between different diasporic orientations towards an imagined home nation and an imagined global faith community coupled with 'new roles and demands, new political spaces [that] are opened by diaspora interactions' (Clifford, 1997: 259). In this fluid context, gender relations are contested and renegotiated, and the religious arena emerges as a potential site for gender-equal citizenship and participation.

In non-Muslim contexts, Islam is often viewed as a source of social control, especially in relation to women (Lien, 1995; Stang Dahl, 1997). Within feminist pro-Islamic discourse, furthermore, it is common to perceive the male religious elite as responsible for patriarchal practices among Muslims (Hassan, 1991; Mernissi, 1991). From an Islamic feminist point of view, Islam can and must be reformed and stripped of its patriarchal elements in order to ensure equality for women and men. A rereading and reinterpretation of the Qur'an in the direction of supporting gender equality in arenas such as the private home, the labour market and in politics is a crucial element in this process. Contributors such as Amina Wadud and Anne Sofie Roald, who are placed within Muslim scholarship, are critical of patriarchal features of Islam and demonstrate that such new modes of interpretation are both possible and necessary (Roald, 2001; Wadud, 1999, 2006). Significantly, Wadud's critical position includes challenges to the traditional view that Muslim women cannot lead gender-mixed prayers in the form of her actually leading one-off prayer events attended by both women and men. Various and contested interpretations of religious faith, and differences between formal religion (as defined by religious authorities) and religious practice, imply contradictions and ambivalence in the relationship between gender and religion. Within this area of conflict, there is an ongoing change in relations between Muslim women and men and in their roles within religious institutions.

Importantly, the immigrant Muslim women who participated in my study did not express any identification with Islamic feminism. Most of the women subscribe to the notion that women and men have equal *value*, and view the roles of women and men as *complementary*. Within a complementary gender system, women's formal duties are related to house-keeping and child-rearing, while men's duties are related to providing for the family. This ideal, which is in accordance with classic Islamic family law (see Esposito, 1982), is, however, actively contested by Muslim women who participate in the Norwegian labour market, and also by men who take on duties in the home (Nyhagen Predelli, 2004). One of the strategies used by women to argue for their own active participation outside the home is to invoke the historical tradition of Islam, as women at the time of the Prophet Muhammad were actively engaged in public affairs (Schimmel, 1997: 27).

I want to suggest that Muslim women in Norway balance and negotiate their gendered roles in a contested space, which on the one hand is defined by patriarchal rules and an Islamic value system, and on the other hand by practical acts of gender-equal citizenship by Muslim women in the public sphere, including the labour market, politics and civil society. A cross-cutting influence is that of the Norwegian state with its ideology of gender equality and support for women's rights in all areas of life, with the one exception that the state norm of gender equality is not formally

applied to religious contexts. Within this contested space, Muslim women continue to struggle for inclusion and participation.

Both Christianity and Islam include elements that can be interpreted as discriminatory and subjugating and/or as liberating for women. Women must relate to the patriarchal features of their own religion, but as agents they are also capable of finding ways to achieve power and influence through religious faith and practice. Inspired by the sociologist R.W. Connell's concept of 'contested gender regimes' (Connell, 1987), I have chosen to apply the concept of 'patriarchal gender regimes' in my analysis of the current structures of gender relations in mosques. Importantly, these structures are not frozen but are malleable and changeable. After a presentation of the research methodology, the analysis is structured by the following themes: the mosque as a gendered room, the importance of the mosque for women, and women's new roles in the mosque.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Norway has a Protestant Lutheran state church in which 86.5 percent of the population of about 4.5 million holds membership (Winsnes, 2001). Processes of globalization and internationalization, leading to increased migration and geographical mobility, have produced a more varied religious landscape. Today, Islam is the second largest religion in Norway. As stated above, the majority of Muslims in Norway are immigrants, but their offspring constitute a new generation of Norwegian-born and raised Muslims. Of the estimated 120,000–150,000 Muslims in Norway, roughly 72,000 are organized in 82 registered congregations that receive financial funding from the government (SSB, 2004, 2006). Islam has a well-defined set of religious instructions (The Five Pillars of Islam) that unites all believers, but Islamic faith and practice has undergone historical processes of differentiation that have resulted in a variety of schools of Islamic law and Islamic sects (see Esposito, 1998: 85; 1982).

In the analysis I do not distinguish between the different schools of law, faith traditions, sects and congregations that the interviewees belong to, or between their different ethnic backgrounds. The interviewees, 38 women<sup>2</sup> and 12 men, are Muslims who have immigrated to Norway from Pakistan or Morocco. In terms of women's participation in the mosque, I have chosen to focus primarily on the first generation of women immigrants, as this provides an opportunity to reflect on possible effects of migration. The study is based on data from 'the country of reception' and not on data from 'the country of origin', which makes it difficult to state with certainty whether changes have been produced by migration and settlement in a new sociocultural and political-historical context. Notably, changes are taking place also in the immigrants' country of origin.

Women's experiences and viewpoints are the central focus of analysis, but I also use data from interviews with six religious leaders (imams) of mosques in Oslo in order to illustrate what we might call 'an establishment view' on women's participation and roles. Furthermore, I have repeatedly observed Friday prayer in various mosques. A majority of the interviewed women attend Friday prayer in the mosque on quite a regular basis. A majority of the women have lived in Norway for a longer period of time than the median for their gender and ethnic group,<sup>3</sup> and three out of five have received education beyond compulsory schooling.<sup>4</sup> A relatively high level of education, participation in the labour market and long settlement in Norway could be thought of as reducing the importance of the mosque as a place for the social gathering of women. As we will see, however, the interviewees stated that the mosque provides them with an important social and religious community. The women have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

In the last section of the article I have used secondary sources in the form of national daily newspaper articles to support the claim that Muslim women are taking on new roles both within and outside the religious arena of the mosque. The text-based analysis should be regarded as preliminary, and a more in-depth use of media sources would be required for a full-fledged study. The newspaper articles are less concerned with first-generation immigrants than with the offspring generation. The increased participation of the offspring generation of Muslim women must be seen in relation to the increased participation of Muslim women in the institutional religious arena, but it can also be read as indicating tensions between different generations of Muslim women. Young Muslim women who grow up in Norway will be socialized within an educational system that endorses the state ideology of gender equality and support of women's rights, with an emphasis on the full interchangeability of women's and men's roles and positions in home and society (Halsaa, 2001). It is likely that the daughters of immigrant Muslim women will continue the struggle for women's inclusion and participation in the religious sphere.

I undertook the research for this article from the perspective of a white Norwegian woman who does not practise any religious faith. My analysis is informed by the notion that equal opportunities and rights for women and men are desirable and just. The respondents may have reacted to me as a member of the dominant group by either taking a more traditional or conservative stand to underscore differences between them and me, or a more liberal stand to emphasize similarities. Nevertheless, I hope to have grasped some of the ongoing changes of gendered ideas and practices that are taking place in mosques in Oslo, Norway.



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THE MOSQUE AS A GENDERED SPACE

The trend among immigrants in Norway is to organize religious life in a congregational form. This is true also for Muslims in Norway, even though mosques in Muslim countries do not normally have a congregational form. Abusharaf (1998: 239) emphasizes that, in general, the mosque is not based on individual membership, it does not have a professional priesthood, and it is primarily a place for religious sermons and prayer (see also Vogt, 2000). In diaspora, however, the mosque has taken on the characteristics of a congregation, as it is increasingly based on individual membership. Moreover, the congregational form is emphasized by the role and position of the imam, the various functions played by the mosque towards its members and the role of the mosque in the larger society. In Norway, the system of public funding encourages the establishment of congregations. Funding is allocated on the basis of congregational membership, and congregations therefore have an interest in attracting more members.

The need for religious fellowship is sufficient for immigrants to come together to practise their faith, but their gender and family status may play a decisive role in terms of whether or not formal congregations are established. The first small group of Pakistani men arrived in Norway in 1967, while the first Pakistani women arrived in 1973 (Ahlberg, 1990: 16). The first organizations among Pakistani and Moroccan immigrants in Norway were established by men. Their activities were first and foremost of a social and cultural character, in addition to the provision of advice and assistance related to housing and employment (Natvig, 1993). Immigration through family reunion and the arrival of women and children transformed the Pakistani and Moroccan diasporas in Norway and accentuated the need for religious organizations (see also Lewis, 1994: 54).

The building of religious institutions among Muslims in Norway was initiated by Pakistani immigrants in the 1970s. As a result of inner power struggles, a number of large congregations have split into smaller ones, and today there are about 15 Muslim congregations in Oslo where the majority of members have their background from Pakistan (Leirvik, 2007). The Moroccans in Norway established their first mosque in 1981 (Vogt, 2000: 42), and since then a further two mosques have been established in Oslo. In all, there are about 40 Muslim congregations with varying ethnic compositions and religious traditions in the neighbouring counties of Oslo and Akershus (SSB, 2004).

The building of religious institutions in diaspora can in many ways be gendered. In part it is based on traditions from the immigrants' country of origin, which in the case of the Muslim congregation is expressed in the gendered partition of physical space. The building of religious institutions is also influenced by needs that arise in the settlement context. The

gendered partition of space in the mosque is often visible in the assignment of different rooms to women and men, the different sizes of these rooms and separate entrances to the mosque. Such practices are common in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The gendered allocation of space is related to perceptions and rules about who has a duty to participate in congregational prayer (a duty limited to men), and perceptions of women as objects of male sexual desire. The physical gender segregation can also be seen as an expression of social control, in the sense that contact and touch between women and men is minimized. At the same time, a separate space for women may provide them with a female community in which established gendered practices can be discussed in a safe environment.

The mosques in Oslo have chosen various practical solutions, but the principle of a gendered segregation of space is applied in one form or another. In the Tabligh mosques, where evangelization towards fellow Muslims has priority, women are not admitted. However, both women and men participate in missionary activities that often take place in private homes. Several of the mosques where women are admitted report that women are in need of more space; indicating the increasing popularity of the mosque as an arena for women's participation. A willingness to accommodate the participation of women by offering space is of course important for the mosque's ability to mobilize women, as it effectively signals that women are welcome. For some time, women were not admitted to the mosque of the Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC). The ideological tradition (*deobandi*) of the ICC has not encouraged women to participate in mosques in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> A group of women therefore gathered on their own initiative for a few years outside the mosque to read the Qur'an and learn about Islam. Women were admitted to the ICC mosque at the end of the 1980s, and were then assigned a room with loudspeakers (a new ICC mosque with a separate women's room is currently under construction). In this room, women can follow the prayer, and they have weekly gatherings where they listen to the imam's explanations of the Qur'an and interact socially with other women. In the Norwegian context, we can witness a change in the patriarchal gender regime in that women are increasingly invited to participate in the mosque. Today, there is a strong sense of the importance of including women at the ICC, and the practice is actively supported by the imam. At the same time, however, the imam is keen to point out that women have duties to take care of in the home, and that it is not their duty to pray in the mosque. In order to avoid pressuring women to come to the mosque, the imam emphasizes that:

There is no advantage in coming to the mosque. It is equally advantageous to pray at home. To pray at home is good, because women have responsibilities there. . . . If the woman is exempt from coming to the mosque, it is not to oppress her, but to help her in carrying out her duties at home.

The female interviewees are also very aware that they do not have a religious duty to go to the mosque, and emphasize that they attend the mosque because of their own wishes and needs. The absence of a formal duty can thus be interpreted as a freedom to choose whether or not one wants to be included in the institutional religious community.

In accordance with Islamic family law, the interviewed imams subscribe to a gendered division of labour where the man is responsible for providing for the family, while the woman has duties related to house-keeping and the upbringing of children. The imams all agree that it is best for women to pray at home, but they also state that it is important that women attend the mosque. These views underline the different functions of the mosque towards women and men. While the presence of men is based on notions of religious duty, the presence of women is legitimated through the new function of the mosque in diaspora as a place for social meetings and learning. As such, there is not necessarily any contradiction between the notions that women should pray at home and that they should attend the mosque. At the Jamaat ahl-e-sunnat mosque, the imam stated that it is best for women to pray at home, despite the fact that this is the Muslim congregation in Oslo with the longest tradition of including women (see Vogt, 2001). Contrary to the ICC, the Jamaat ahl-e-sunnat belongs to an ideological tradition (*barelwi*) that in Pakistan is no stranger to the religious participation of women.<sup>6</sup> At the new Jamaat mosque, which was finished in 2006, women have been allocated a larger space than in the old mosque. The new room is on the first floor, above the main prayer room on the ground floor, and from here they can watch the imam in the main room via internal television.

In the Moroccan congregation Masjid Attouba, the imam stated that it is equally important for women and men to attend the mosque. Women in this congregation have contributed to financing the purchase of a building by way of selling their own jewellery. According to Vogt (2000: 79), the women demanded to have their own prayer room in the new building, an act which may be interpreted as 'an act of citizenship' (Lister, 2003). Today, the women gather for prayer and lectures in their own room in the mosque. This example is important, as it illustrates that women have to struggle in order to change the norm of exclusion of women from the institutional religious community. A further example noted by Vogt (2000) is the demand of women in another mosque to be able to participate in the *id*-prayer at the end of the month of fasting (Ramadan). In the Muslim world women generally do not participate in the *id*-prayer, but women in this mosque in Oslo made an alliance with their men in order to change the patriarchal gender regime of the mosque. Through such acts of citizenship, women have gained inclusion and space, and are now considered a natural part of the religious community. That the place of women in the mosque is not equal to that of men, however, is illustrated by the fact that women are allocated

much less space than men, and that they do not have direct access to the main prayer room and must listen to the imam through loudspeakers. Among the interviewees, no one questioned the gendered segregation of physical space in the mosque. Women have accepted that their space is separate from the men, and are keener to appreciate the fact that they actually have a space where they can gather as a female community. A principle of gender inequality is thus accepted at one level, while at another level women struggle for inclusion and participation.

The gendered space of the mosque reproduces a patriarchal gender regime where women do not possess the same rights and duties as men. The fact that women do not have a duty to participate in the mosque can in practice function as a constraint, as it sends a signal that it is unimportant for women to attend the mosque. At the same time, some women use the absence of a duty as an explanation for their lack of participation in the mosque. 'I do not have much time, and if I don't have to, why should I? It is men who have a duty to pray in the mosque, not us', says Jumanah. In this sense, the absence of a duty can also be perceived as a freedom enjoyed by women only. Despite the absence of a duty for women to pray in the mosque, however, many women do attend religious and social gatherings there and in effect they are challenging the established gender regimes of the mosques.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MOSQUE FOR WOMEN

After migration, the mosque takes on an increasingly important role in the maintenance of religious belief and in the religious education of migrants. As Ulfah comments:

If we only stay at home when we live here in Norway, then we don't understand that much about our religion. In Pakistan the culture is Muslim, and there we know a lot about our religion even if we don't go to the mosque or to the Qur'an school.

Kamilah, who is a Qur'an teacher, also saw the mosque as an important source for learning about Islam in diaspora:

Pakistan is an Islamic country. Women gather in their own organizations, and ladies talk to them about Islam. There it is easy for them to learn about Islam. Here in Norway it is more important to come to the mosque, because women here do not have their own organizations in which they can learn.

Nadirah emphasized that learning in the mosque is not confined to religion: 'we have seminars and meetings about political elections, marriage, and so on'. Knowledge production in the mosque contributes to the

strengthening of both individual and collective religious identity. Nargis emphasized the importance of women's efforts in the recollectivization of Islam after migration: 'We ourselves must teach Islam to our children. In Pakistan the entire environment around us teaches Islam to our children. Here we must create an Islamic environment ourselves.' To create this environment demands zealous work, which strengthens the sense of a shared religious identity.

Several interviewees recounted that in their country of origin women visited each other's houses with the purpose of praying, reading from the Qur'an and learning about religion. In Norway, their homes are less spacious, and they choose to attend the mosque instead to create and participate in a religious community of women. 'In Pakistan it is not common for women to go to the mosque. They pray at home. Here it is different', said Sulafah. 'In Norway', she continued, 'we go to the mosque, because we don't have any other place to go. I cannot have a hundred ladies in my house and cook for them and clean the dishes.' Practical considerations related to space can thus be among the reasons why women seek to come together in a more public and institutional arena. Such changes in practice can lead to both opportunities and constraints for women's participation. When women gather within the confines of a private home, they have fewer restrictions on their behaviour (for example, they do not need to wear a headscarf), they have an informal way of communicating and they are not obliged to follow rules set by men. In the mosque, on the other hand, women must initially participate according to conditions that are established by men, they must adapt to and perhaps accept patriarchal organizational forms, and their freedom of action is limited. At the same time, however, the mosque presents the women with new opportunities by offering an arena where it is legitimate for them to collectively practise their religious faith.

Women also come together to satisfy their social needs, and several mosques have organized separate women's groups. The interviewees stated that such groups are needed as they provide an informal setting in which women can gather strength from each other. Masudah believed it is healthy for housewives to get out of the house and meet other women in the mosque. 'In Pakistan we have lots of friends and relatives. Here it is different', she said. Rushda also pointed to the social aspect of her participation in the mosque:

All the ladies [in the mosque] know me well. It is important to listen to the imam and to talk to each other. We don't have time to visit each other. We have a place where we meet and talk. We are bound to secrecy, and everyone can talk about their problems. I don't have any family here, and I need someone to talk to. We have fun and laugh – all women need that. It is not enough to stay at home and take care of the children and only talk to your husband. We need to talk to other women.

In a sense, institutional religion is thus able to offer a substitute for close family relations in Pakistan in the form of close friendly relations in the diaspora context. Issues that would previously have been discussed among women relatives are now being talked about among women who share their religious faith and the experience of migration. Some women, however, choose deliberately not to attend the mosque. Bashirah said she has never gone to the mosque: 'I think it is better for women to pray at home. Mosques are only for men, not for women.' Latifah found that when women gather in the mosque, their focal point easily shifts from that of religion to more trivial matters. Latifah therefore enjoys hearing about Islam through radio and television. 'In the mosque we are forgetful, and start chatting', said Latifah, who nevertheless thought that the mosque is important for people who are lonely.

## WOMEN TAKE ON NEW ROLES

Traditionally, the mosque is considered 'men's arena' (Vogt, 2000: 78), and 'the male orientation' is described by Darsh (1990) as a general phenomenon in mosques. According to Haddad and Lummis (1987: 130), 'in most parts of the Islamic world women still rarely participate in mosque activities and in fact seldom attend the mosque at all'. This picture is supported by Roald (2001: 305), who states that very few mosques in India and Pakistan are open to women. Most of my interviewees also recounted that it is unusual for women to attend the mosque in Pakistan and Morocco. Differences between urban centres and rural areas, however, seem to play a part in the degree to which women participate in the mosque. Both Kamilah and Nawal said that while many women in big cities in Pakistan attend Friday prayer in the mosque, such a practice is unusual in the countryside. Many of the Pakistani and Moroccan immigrants in Norway come from the countryside. For women who originate from Pakistan and Morocco, it is likely that migration has led to increased participation in mosques in diaspora. Such a development has also taken place in the US, where Muslim women play an increasingly important role in fundraising, education and prayer (Haddad and Lummis, 1987).

Participation in these activities means that women achieve both informal and formal influence in the decision-making structure of the mosques (Haddad and Lummis, 1987). Research on both Muslim and Christian fundamentalist women in the US confirms that when women meet in the congregation, they acquire power in internal negotiations and decision-making (Brasher, 1998; Haddad and Lummis, 1987). The congregational structure of the mosque is in itself conducive to the creation of new opportunities for women to take on formal and informal positions of leadership (see Abusharaf, 1998; Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz, 1999).

The picture painted by Haddad and Lummis of the US is supported by my interviews and observations in mosques in Oslo. Muslim women who have immigrated to Norway have gained social importance in the context of organized religion at the congregational level, compared to the situation in their countries of origin. In this case, the institutionalization of the religion of migrants in diaspora has implied some changes in gender relations and gender regimes that are advantageous to women. On the one hand, migrant women must continue to relate to patriarchal features of Islamic faith and practice, such as the gendered division of space in the mosque, the patriarchal forms of governance and the religious doctrines that may not be interpreted in women's favour. On the other hand, women can also find ways in which to achieve influence and power on the religious arena.

New opportunities to participate and to exercise leadership result in part from the new and extended functions of the mosque in diaspora. An important part of this development is the use of female Qur'an teachers in the education of women and children. Kamilah, for example, leads the women's group and is a Qur'an teacher in her mosque, and she also leads a Qur'an school in one of the boroughs of Oslo. There is also a development towards women taking on more formal positions of power within Islamic congregations. According to Vogt (2000: 70), two Sunni mosques in Oslo have women members of their board, and women have the right to vote within a Shia congregation. The boards of the Muslim Student Association (Muslimsk Studentsamfunn) at the University of Oslo and Norwegian Muslim Youth (Norges Muslimske Ungdom) also have women representatives, and the Pakistani Student Association has since 2006 been led by a Muslim woman who is supportive of feminist interpretations of Islam.<sup>7</sup> One mosque has declared publicly that it wishes to employ 'a female imam' who can teach women.<sup>8</sup> That women should be able to take on the role as imam towards men was nevertheless excluded by the imams I interviewed. They justified their standpoint by referring to perceptions of women's impurity and the necessity of gender segregation.

It is possible, however, that we are observing the contours of a slow and silent revolution where women are both taking and being given more space and increasingly important positions in the mosques. In 2002, the World Islamic Mission mosque appointed Amber Khan as its media spokesperson, and Khan saw her appointment as a sign of increased gender equality.<sup>9</sup> Another sign of change towards greater equality between women and men was the appointment in October 2000 of the Norwegian woman and convert Lena Larsen as leader of the Islamic Council (Islamsk Råd), an umbrella organization for Muslim congregations in Norway. In the context of Western Europe, the appointment of a woman to such a position is rather unique. Recently, the Islamic Council has used Karima Solberg, another female

Norwegian convert, as a spokesperson. A further development in this direction depends on the extent to which women themselves continue to demand space and positions by challenging the patriarchal gender regime, and on men holding positions of power being willing to give way for women.

Even if religious associations in Norway are exempt from gender-equality legislation, the majority society, including the state and the media, play a significant role by focusing on gender equality in immigrant congregations. The male mosque leadership is thus under pressure both internally, from women and young people, and externally, from critics located either within or outside Muslim communities. An important recent development was initiated by Kadra Yusuf, a young Muslim woman of Somali background who in April 2007 publicly called for imams in Norwegian mosques to reinterpret Islam in ways that are more inclusive of women. Her call created a media storm, and she was also physically assaulted as a result of her outspokenness. Another direct response has been the call for a meeting with Muslim religious leaders by the then Norwegian minister of gender equality, Karita Bekkemellem Orheim.<sup>10</sup>

It is important, however, not to misinterpret or exaggerate the signs of a development towards a more gender-equal practice in mosques in Norway. My data support Vogt's claim that, in the main, women occupy a systemic periphery in Muslim congregations, by being allocated the smallest and most inconvenient rooms (Vogt, 2000: 80). The fact that immigrant men experience difficulties in entering the labour market, that they get jobs they are overqualified for and that positions of leadership within the majority society are largely unobtainable for them may also contribute to a fortification of the patriarchal gender regimes within mosques. Such processes are found to take place within some immigrant congregations in the US, and contribute to what Warner has named 'the persistence and, indeed, enhancement, of patriarchy in immigrant congregations' (Warner, 1998: 24). Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the arguments used to support the increased inclusion and participation of women in the mosques in Norway will develop from within the current framework of complementary gender roles or also from a feminist framework emphasizing equal rights for women and men.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When Smith (1978: 1178) claims that immigrant communities are not 'transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and, therefore, arenas of change', he portrays a picture that can be recognized in the organized religious communities of Muslim immigrants in



Norway. Immigrants bring with them religious faith and practice from their countries of origin, but the Norwegian context offers them and their offspring the opportunity to develop and choose alternative forms of associational life. Not least, we have seen that Muslim women in Norway take on an active role of citizenship where they both preserve religious traditions and create a new religious practice. Muslim immigrant congregations can legitimately be portrayed as patriarchal gender regimes, but there are clear signs that these gender regimes are increasingly being challenged or contested both from within and from the larger society. Muslim women and men are putting pressure on mosques, both directly and indirectly, in order to make them more inclusive towards women. The degree to which women will gain real influence and power through participation in decision-making structures remains to be seen. In the end, it is men who must accommodate women's wishes of increased participation through what can be described as 'patriarchal bargains' (Kandiyoti, 1988).

The changes that are taking place within the mosques in Norway in terms of women's participation are occurring from within a religious context that continues to emphasize gender complementarity in the form of equal values, and not gender equality in the form of equal rights. Muslim immigrant women are thus embracing changes in their own position and participation in the mosque without necessarily embracing a language of rights. An emphasis on the equal value of women and men may open up patriarchal concessions to women by providing them with new spaces for active citizenship. An acceptance of different rights for women and men will, however, function to constrain women's citizenship and to maintain patriarchal gender regimes.

Children of immigrants are likely to continue to support changes towards an increased equality between women and men within religious congregations. In their study of Muslims in the US, Haddad and Lummis (1987: 130) conclude that the longer Muslim women and men live in the US, the more likely it is that they will support an active role for women in the mosque and women's eligibility for non-religious positions of leadership. A central question is whether changes towards increased gender equality should be a matter of internal decision-making within religious associations, or whether state-implemented laws on gender equality and international conventions on human rights should be imposed on religious communities from the outside. This is a difficult question, which is currently dealt with by both Muslim women and men and the larger society in which they live. Notwithstanding the choice of strategy, the desired outcome must be that women and men have equal rights and are free to choose the extent to which they want to act as full citizens at work, in the family, in civil society and politics and in religious observance.

## NOTES

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1. My inspiration for using the term 'borderland' is Tastsoglou (2006: 200–1), who sees it as 'delineating a space where cultural affinities are being negotiated'.
2. Of these 38 women, 28 originated from Pakistan and nine from Morocco. One female interviewee was a Norwegian-born convert and was not included in the analysis. The interviews were conducted in 1999 and 2000.
3. Twenty-six of the women interviewees have lived in Norway for 18 years or more.
4. Furthermore, 18 of the women worked from home, while half of these had previously participated in the Norwegian labour market. Fifteen women worked outside the home, and among these, 11 were employed in the education sector. Five women were on sick leave or received social benefits. With one exception, all the women have been married, and they have on average three children each.
5. Kari Vogt, University of Oslo (pers. comm., June 2002). For the difference between the *deobandi* and *barelwi* traditions, see Vogt (2000).
6. Kari Vogt (pers. comm., June 2002).
7. See *Ny Tid* (20 April 2007).
8. This was the Kurdish mosque Bediuzzeman in Oslo (*Aftenposten Aften*, 23 August 2002).
9. See *Aftenposten* (17 August 2002).
10. See VG Nett (2007a, 2007b). Kadra Yusuf first stepped into the public arena in Norway in 2000, when she exposed the accepting attitude of some Somali Muslim religious leaders towards female circumcision.
11. Whether or not such a framework of equal rights should be argued from a position of Islamic feminism or that of secular feminism is currently an issue of scholarly debate (see Moghadam, 2002).

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